The Talisman

Lawrence King

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For Daniel Hutchison

Prologue

James Kaur is on the museum's permanent staff and security is his responsibility. The video cameras throughout the museum are permanently fixed, but traveling exhibits require repositioning the camera heads and additional considerations. He has spent a long day working on video surveillance and is ready to go home to his family.

Masters of the Italian Renaissance is a complex exhibit. It will be a late-spring showpiece for the museum, but its many set pieces, display cases, and specialized lighting have made security more difficult than usual.

Mr. Kaur is still not sure about the tableau in the north gallery, closest to the restrooms. The layout of this portion of the exhibit features an imposing portrait of a Venetian gentlewoman and her dog. The woman is looking straight out at the visitor. The dog, however, is looking down, perhaps at something on the ground. The art director for the exhibit has specified a display case beneath and to the left of the painting. It's in line with the dog's gaze and draws the visitors' attention from the large painting down to the details of the showcase. The case contains objects from the Renaissance woman's personal belongings. The overall effect is quite dramatic.

The lighting for the room is focused on the large portrait. It's one of the most valuable pieces of the exhibit. The video surveillance for the room also focuses on the painting and is angled to pick up people who approach it or withdraw from it.

Mr. Kaur is troubled because the display case doesn't really show up in the camera feed. The case provides illumination for the objects

within it, but lighting was not designed for its exterior. On video, you can barely see the side of the case. Even then, it's poorly lit. He could add an additional camera. It would require rewiring for proper placement, but it could be done.

Mr. Kaur removes his glasses and rubs his eyes. Recalibrating the video feeds has given him a headache. He's inclined to let things be the way they are. It's a small display case. The Italians didn't specify any particular security for it.

He puts on his coat and prepares to leave.

On his way out, he walks through the exhibit. He takes pride in his work and is pleased with the results. Masters of the Italian Renaissance looks wonderful and meets all the security standards that the museum and its insurance provider require.

As he passes the doorway to the north gallery, he notices the portrait of the woman and her dog. The woman's gaze catches his eye, and he enters the room. Her stare is commanding, and Mr. Kaur is drawn farther into the gallery. The placard in front of the painting reads: *Paolo Veronese (Paolo Caliari), Portrait of Veronica Conti, Venice, 1570.*

She's a stout figure with one hand resting at her hip. Mr. Kaur wonders what she would think of the exhibit. Could she have imagined strangers looking at her, centuries after her death? Perhaps that's exactly what she planned by having commissioned the portrait: a form of immortality.

She stares straight at Mr. Kaur with an imperial gaze.

On the left side of the portrait is the subject's dressing table. It's covered with a variety of personal items: a set of combs, a perfume bottle, a hand mirror, and some jewelry, including a broken bronze talisman.

On the right side of the painting is the dog. Mr. Kaur follows its gaze down to the display case. He sighs. *The security is not perfect, but it will have to do.*

He looks into the case and sees a variety of small items that once belonged to the Venetian. Suddenly, he realizes, *These are the actual items from the painting.* Her personal items have been preserved down through the centuries. He frowns. One of them has shifted out of its stand. It's the broken talisman depicted in the painting. The placard for the item reads: *Roman Bronze Talisman. Pompeii. Early Imperial Period, 1st Century BC.* Apparently, the Venetian gentlewoman herself collected ancient pieces of art.

He fishes a set of keys out of his pocket and spends a minute searching for the correct one. He disables the alarm wire, opens the case, and

places the talisman back on its small stand. It's heavy for its size, likely solid bronze. Where broken, its edges are sharp.

Mr. Kaur looks up at the portrait, but from this angle, the gentlewoman is looking over his shoulder. The dog is now staring directly at him. Without relocking the case or enabling the alarm, he stands back to review his work. It's been quite a long day, and he's glad to be going home. All is well. All is safe. Mr. Kaur is smiling.

Above, and to his right, the small dog appears to be smiling right back at him.

Chapter One

Roman Holiday

Brian and I are crossing a wide piazza when I feel the tremor. I've lived most of my life in Southern California, so I immediately know it's an earthquake. I see that Brian is stumbling a bit and has a look of alarm on his face.

"It's an earthquake," I say. "We should stay out in the open."

The locals seem to take the quake in stride. Although I don't understand Italian, there's no alarm in their voices. After the initial shock, one couple laughs, and most everyone returns to their activities. They must be used to earthquakes, too.

The last of the afternoon sun bathes everything in a golden light, and Brian and I continue across the piazza. Brian's wearing shorts and sandals with a lime-green polo-style shirt that makes his reddish-brown hair and hazel eyes stand out. The air is warm and calm. Street vendors are beginning to pack up for the day.

When the second tremor hits, I notice Howie.

My dog, Howie, is standing in the doorway of a shop just ahead of us. I'm glad to see him, but also surprised. I didn't expect we'd see him. He shouldn't be here. He's wagging his tail, but when the second tremor hits, he's knocked off balance.

"Howie!"

He struggles to his feet, and I notice that the second tremor is still going. It must be quite a quake. Brian stumbles a second time but

seems OK. He sits down, cross-legged, on the flagstones. He's going to wait it out on the ground.

It's a bit darker now. The first star of the evening can be seen over the ocean in the distance. The second tremor finally dies down. Brian looks up at me as if to say, "Now what?"

That's when Howie takes off.

It's hard to keep up with him when he gets going. Although small, Italian greyhounds are speedy, and he seems to be on a mission.

"I've got to catch him!" I say to Brian as I leave him behind in the piazza. "I can't lose Howie again."

There's an odd scent in the air. Something like rotten eggs or burning vegetation. It reminds me of something, but I can't quite put my finger on it.

I turn a corner and head down another street. As I struggle to keep up with Howie, I pass residential buildings made of stone and brick. Shuttered windows line the roadway. I don't seem to be catching up with Howie—but I can still see him ahead of me.

The third tremor is accompanied by a deafening explosion. A woman screams, and people tumble out of a building on my left. They head back the way I've come, back toward the piazza, downhill toward the sea.

Many of the streets have steps cut into them and are little more than stairways up the slope. Howie ducks into one of these side streets and bounds up the stairs to a higher level. This must be a commercial street. There are shop fronts and market stalls. The shops are now closed or have been abandoned. A lone child sits in a doorway, crying. I hesitate for a moment, but as I walk over to help the little girl, she's picked up by a young woman. "Mama!" says the child, and they hurry off, the child clinging to the woman's neck. They head downslope, back the way I've come.

I look ahead for Howie and see that he's stopped. He's looking back, over his shoulder, up into the sky. I follow his gaze: a fireball. *This isn't just an earthquake.* I remember the eruption of Mount Saint Helens in Washington State and shudder. *A volcanic eruption?*

I track the fireball as it arches overhead and falls downhill from us, far below, into the sea. Sudden clouds of gray steam rise to meet the black clouds above. A wave breaks over the harbor in the distance capsizing many of the fishing boats.

Another explosion creates another fireball, and the sky darkens further. The sun is completely obscured, and I'm plunged into smoke and near darkness.

Suddenly, the air feels hot against my face. The smell I noticed earlier is more intense. *It's from the volcano.*

I've finally caught up with Howie. He's crouching in the entrance of a private residence. I bend down to pick him up, but another tremor knocks me over. Howie and I sprawl on a mosaic of black-and-white tiles. I pick him up and hold him to my chest.

A third fireball arches overhead, momentarily illuminating the darkening clouds from underneath. That's when the thick, smothering layer of hot ash and death begins to rain down on the city.

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"That's quite a dream," says Brian. "I noticed you left me alone in the piazza."

For a moment, I think my fiancé is mad at this silly dream, or at me, but then I get it: *He's teasing*.

"Do you still dream about Howie?" he asks.

"Not as often," I say. "More since we've been on the trip, of course." One of our purposes in coming to Italy was to scatter Howie's ashes along the Italian Riviera. I thought I would bring my Italian greyhound back to Italy for his final resting place. Even thinking about it sounds silly; an affectation. All I know is that when we released his ashes Tuesday, on a beach outside of Genoa, I also felt a release in my heart. I completed a promise I had made to myself and feel lighter for it.

We're sitting at a café on the sidewalk in front of our hotel in Rome. The early morning spring air is chilly, but not so cold that we couldn't have breakfast outside. Neither Brian nor I have been out of the USA before, and we're enjoying everything about our spring-break visit. In addition to dispersing Howie's ashes, the trip is also a celebration of our engagement. Brian's wearing khaki slacks, a rust-colored polo, and a hooded jacket.

"I'll try the frittata," I say to the waiter. "Just vegetables, please." I've been a vegetarian for over ten years and have learned that I have to ask for things in Italy. I can't expect to see vegetarian things on the menu—even if I could read all the Italian. So far, everyone's been nice enough to make something for me, and it's all been delicious. Most of the service people in Rome speak English, making things very easy. It's been a wonderful trip.

Brian's not as hungry and is having a traditional *prima colazione*, which we've learned is a caffe latte and either sweet rolls or bread and jam.

"What would you like to do today?" he asks. "We saw most of the Vatican, but we've scarcely seen any of the other sights of the city. Maybe MAXXI, the Museo Nazionale?"

He can see I'm not so excited about another museum, so he changes tactics. "We could always reenact your dream."

"What do you mean?"

"We could go to Pompeii."

Suddenly, it hits me. He's right. It was a dream about Pompeii. Mount Vesuvius erupted shortly after the biblical time of Jesus, and the entire city of Pompeii was entombed in volcanic ash. That must be the background of my dream.

"You're right," I say. "I hadn't thought about Pompeii. That must be what it was. I'm relieved, too. It was one of those dreams that feel like they're going to come true. But I remember reading about Pompeii in a history class. My dream wasn't about what *will* happen; it was a dream about something that *already* happened."

Brian smiles. "Well, it could be both if you want. Not the eruption part, of course. I'm pretty sure Vesuvius is extinct. But we could go there. It's not that far."

Brian can see my eyes lighting up. I'm not sure why Pompeii sounds so intriguing, but it certainly has captured my imagination.

The waiter brings our coffees, and we ask him about it.

"Pompeii? Yes. It's not far from here, *seniori*. But leave your rental car here. You don't want to drive, I think. You want the train. You would drive all day, but it is only ninety minutes by train to Naples, then maybe another hour to Pompeii on the Circumvesuviana."

"Could we do it today, do you think?" asks Brian.

"Oh, *sì*, *sì*. It's easy. Your hotel has a package, no doubt. Ask the concierge."

"What do you think?" asks Brian, looking at me.

"I'd like to, but it may be a bit weird. A lot of people died at Pompeii."

"I'm fine with that if you'd like to see it."

I remember my dream and think about Howie. Was the dream his way of telling me to visit Pompeii? Was the dream really a prediction of something that I should do or just a subconscious memory from hearing about Pompeii in school?

"I think I *would* like to see it. Who knows when we'll be back to Italy?"

"I'd like to come back," says Brian. "There's so much to see and do. Florence is supposed to be amazing. And Venice. I know we can't fit

Venice into our trip this time. We've only got a few days left, but someday, I really want to see Venice. I'd also like to take a cook's tour of Sicily." Brian's eyes light up at the thought of a cook's tour. He saw a brochure for it in the hotel. He's a good cook, and I benefit from it.

"We can come back," I say, smiling at the thought of Brian learning how to cook more Italian. "Sicily would be fun."

Our food arrives, and my frittata is wonderful. It has sun-dried tomatoes, artichoke hearts, and tiny olives mixed into an egg batter. I almost swallow an olive pit before I remember that they're generally served *with* the pits in Italy. No problem. The taste is heavenly.

As we finish our meal, I notice that we're being stared at. At first, I think the older woman is looking at Brian. He's most obviously the tourist, with his freckles and reddish hair and beard. Nobody in Italy looks much like him, and with his good looks, he gets the occasional stare.

But the focus seems to be on me this time.

She's Italian-looking, short, older, and I would say dressed in an outdated style. Most Italians love modern dress and fashion. Brian has spent more money than I like to think on Italian leather goods since we've been here, and for good reason: Italians have wonderful style. You'll see no flip-flops in Rome and few people wearing jeans or short pants. Everyone looks nice and, for the most part, modern.

But this woman looks more like a peasant from an old movie about Italy. She's wearing a dark, long skirt and a white blouse mostly covered by a dark gray shawl. She's got a head covering that obscures some of her face, but it's clear she's been looking at us—or me—for some time. From across the street and down the block, it's hard to say, but I think she's fingering rosary beads in one hand.

She's just noticed that I'm staring back, and it's troubling her. She looks like she's talking to herself, definitely upset.

I'm a good lip-reader and can almost make out her words: *Il malocchio? Il malocho?*

Now she's stopped fingering the rosary and holds up her hand with the pinkie and forefinger extended. It feels like she's flipping me off, although the hand sign is unknown to me. Her face has a grim, defiant look.

"I see you've attracted some attention," says our waiter, stopping by with the check. Brian turns to see the woman with her outstretched hand, still glaring in our direction.

"What's that about?" he asks.

"She must be from the country," says the waiter. "She must have

been raised in the old ways, the superstitious ways. She believes in *il malocchio*. How would you say it? The 'evil eye'?"

"Is that the hand signal?" I ask. "Is she giving me the evil eye?"

"Oh no, *signore*, you misunderstand. You look Italian with your dark hair and long face and nose. But the eyes, you see. You have the blue eyes that no local would have. In the old days, such eyes would identify a witch. She's not giving you the evil eye. The sign she makes with her hand is to ward off a curse. She thinks you give *her* the evil eye."

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The train to Naples was one of the fast ones. The trip was only an hour. We had to wait a bit for the connecting Circumvesuviana train, but we still arrived in Pompeii by midafternoon. The train stop is nearly at the ruins, and it was a short walk to the visitors' center.

While we were on a vacation when I was a kid, Mom and I traveled north from our home in California and went on a road trip through Oregon and parts of Washington. We stopped at the Mount Saint Helens National Volcanic Monument. From high atop one edge of the caldera, you could see the swath of devastation that the eruption of 1980 caused. It blasted the area clean. It's a lifeless landscape like the surface of the moon. Through storyboards and pictures at the visitors' center, we got a sense of the force of the eruption. A popular fishing and hiking destination, Spirit Lake, was completely wiped off the face of the earth. More than fifty people were killed.

I expected Pompeii to be like that: a visitors' center and some storyboards.

Pompeii is not like that. Pompeii is shocking. Pompeii is brutal. At the time of the Mount Vesuvius eruption, it held over eleven thousand souls and covered 170 acres. Virtually everyone died in the eruption of AD 70. Fifteen to twenty feet of hot ash covered the entire city in a matter of minutes. Everything was flash-preserved in a heavy, suffocating blanket of death.

There is a visitors' center in Pompeii, of course. It's a UNESCO World Heritage site and attracts over two million visitors each year. What I didn't realize is that the city was lost for over fifteen hundred years. Most of Pompeii has been dug out since then. The objects that lay beneath the ash have been preserved because of the lack of air and moisture. While the ash removal was taking place, someone got the idea that they might use plaster to fill voids in the layers that once held human bodies. You can now see the exact positions of people when

they died. There are whole galleries of the exhumed plaster bodies. Mothers huddled over infants. Lovers embracing. Some of the plaster casts are terrifying, and I make a hasty exit.

Beyond the visitors' center, the area is a vast necropolis with streets and buildings uncovered and homes open to the sky. You can go on a self-guided exploration of this city of ancient death.

"Does any of this look like your dream?" asks Brian. We're walking down one of the wider streets of excavated Pompeii.

"Not really. It's a little overwhelming. It's like a metropolis-sized cemetery."

"Sorry, honey," says Brian, surveying the landscape. "It *is* a little depressing. Maybe it wasn't the best choice for a day trip."

"It's just not what I expected. I guess I was thinking that Howie brought me here for some reason. I don't see why, though. The landscape certainly doesn't seem familiar."

Brian takes my hand, and we continue walking. Some of the buildings are so well preserved that you can see the colors that the walls were painted. Many mosaic tile floors are perfectly preserved. A few homes have been restored to show how people lived. I am surprised at the amenities. They even had running water and a sewer system.

We spend another hour walking, talking, and looking at Pompeii. We joke about what house we'd want to live in. We laugh at a two-thousand-year-old bathroom and wonder what they used for toilet paper. I'm glad to have Brian with me. His gentle good humor is the perfect antidote to this depressing place.

Shadows from the afternoon sun begin to lengthen, and it's now about four o'clock. The landscape is bathed in the same golden light from my dream. For an instant, I'm stopped cold with déjà vu and missing Howie. Brian looks at me with concern.

"Are you OK?" he asks.

"Yes, I'm just reminded of Howie, from the dream," I explain. I must be looking very pale or odd, because an elderly gentleman also stops to see if I'm OK. He doesn't speak English, and I can't quite explain what I'm feeling or why we're here. I want to tell him we came because of a dream, but the best I can come up with is "*il mio cane che dorme*." I hope that means "the dream of my dog," but I'm not so sure. I can speak Spanish, but my Italian comes entirely from a tourist phrase book.

"*Il cane che dorme?*" He repeats it back to me as a question.

"Um, sì…," I say.

"*Seguimi*," he says, pointing ahead. He's clearly happy to help, al-

though I'm not sure to what end. We follow him about a block and make a turn, uphill to the left.

We're in the piazza from my dream in the same spot where we felt the first earthquake and Brian lost his balance. This is the piazza where I first saw Howie.

"Where are we going?" Brian asks the old gentleman, but he shakes his head, not understanding.

He again says, "*Seguimi*," motioning us to follow.

We cross the piazza as I did in the dream and start down a narrow street, most likely a residential area. We're headed uphill, and I notice the streets that are really stairs cut into the side of the slope. We turn into one of them and climb upward.

We're standing in a wider avenue, a business district. This is the street where I was standing when the first fireball streaked across the sky. The gentleman pauses in thought for a moment, then continues. He makes another turn, also uphill.

"Ah, sì," he says and speeds up a bit.

He's leading us to one of the houses that has been identified with markers for visitors. He leads us to the entrance and turns to face us.

"*Il cane che dorme*," he says with a flourish and points down to the floor of the entryway. It's the entryway from my dream where Howie and I huddled and were entombed by hot ash. I look down at the centuries-old mosaic tiles on the floor. I stifle a gasp.

It's a black-and-white mosaic of a greyhound, of Howie, sleeping. *The Sleeping Dog.*

I begin to cry, but I try my best to thank the old fellow for bringing us here. He nods and smiles, not minding simultaneous tears and happiness.

Brian and I explore the residence. Informational signs in several languages tell you a bit about the owner and his life at the time of the eruption. It was owned by Lucius Caecilius II, a banker. In the well-preserved basement of the house, thousands of documents were found detailing his banking interests and probably acted as a repository for his clients—like an early safe-deposit box system. The house features many frescoes, original wall paintings and floor tiles. The sleeping dog mosaic in the entryway is considered one of Pompeii's treasures.

As Brian looks at some of the surrounding buildings, I sit in the entryway next to the mosaic of Howie. The tiles are cool to the touch. It does look like he's sleeping. I look out and down, across the city. Many of the tourists have left for the day, and the air is still and quiet. I reach down to retie one of my shoes, and I notice the edge of some-

thing sticking out of the dirt between the cobblestones against the step to the entryway. It looks odd, like it's made of metal.

I reach down, and it readily comes free of the ground. It's a fragment of something larger, some kind of medallion or disk. It's a segment about one-half-inch wide and a little over an inch long. It's a ragged pie-shaped piece, and the complete object must have been about three inches in diameter. I hold it in my hand for a minute, looking at its rough edges and trying to identify the metal by its weight and tarnished color. Bronze or weathered copper, maybe. It has a slippery feeling to it, although it's not polished.

My conscious mind knows the fragment should be left behind. Tourists are not supposed to take parts of Pompeii home with them. The piece isn't much of anything. I picture myself just putting it back down where I found it.

Instead, I put it in my pocket, and Brian and I begin our way back down the hill to the train station.



Flying to Rome from Boston was easy. Just one stop at London's Heathrow Airport. Coming home turns out to be more complicated, and we're stuck for a long layover in Barcelona. The airport is nice, but you can only look in airport stores so much during a six-hour stop.

Brian's trying his best to nap. There's a row of padded seats he's found, and he's stretched out on them, with a coat for a pillow. He looks tired, which is not surprising. We got up very early for our flight from Rome. He's surrounded by our carry-on bags. We tried to travel lightly but found Italian treasures to bring home with us.

I'm seated, looking over a manuscript of my new textbook. I'm happy to say the first draft is now complete, and my dissertation advisor is pleased. I'm a new faculty member at Miskatonic University in Massachusetts, and part of my teaching contract says I must write a textbook, an introduction to quantum physics.

Turns out writing is just the start. Then there's editing. Then there's getting peer reviewers. Then there's publishing.

As I read, I'm finding a few areas that could use some polishing. I know my editor will help with the spelling and grammar. I'm more concerned with getting the concepts down in a way that's easy to understand and engaging. I think a better example of Einstein's gravity waves is needed, and I make a note of it.

I'm sitting across the aisle from sleeping Brian. A seat away from me

in the same aisle is a middle-aged woman in a dark blue pantsuit. She's been observing me for a bit, so I decide to introduce myself.

"Hello. I'm Mac. Do you have a long layover, too?"

"Yes, when I booked the ticket to Rome, I'd forgotten about the layover on the way back to London." Her accent tells me that England is most likely her home.

"Did you enjoy Rome?" I ask. "It was our first trip overseas, and I think he fell in love with Italy." I include sleeping Brian in our conversation with a wave of my hand.

"But not you?"

"Oh, I enjoyed the trip, especially the first week and especially Rome. Toward the end, we visited Pompeii, though. The plaster casts of the entombed people were overwhelming. That one day put a cloud over my heart."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I love Italy for its art more than its history. I'm a bit of a Renaissance art buff, and Italy had the best of the painters and sculptors of the period. I could spend a week just looking at the ceiling of the Sistine."

I figure she's talking about the Sistine Chapel in the pope's official residence. We saw it our first week in Italy.

"It's hard to imagine Michelangelo being able to paint lying on a scaffolding, isn't it?" I ask.

"I'm Darlene," she says, "and yes, painting it, designing it, organizing the workers, it's hard to imagine any part of it. It's so grand, so beautiful, so complex. Michelangelo is divine, of course, but Italy was home to so many of the masters: Donatello, Botticelli, Gozzoli, Masaccio."

I'm not a passionate art lover, but I can tell Darlene is. Her face lights up as she tells me about some of the museums she visited and the paintings and sculptures she admires. She looks like a retired schoolteacher with gray hair pulled into a loose ponytail in the back. She's not wearing makeup, but with her animated face and happy disposition, it's easy to think of her as beautiful.

"So many of them survived by doing portraits. You might take years working on a great piece of sculpture, but in the interim, you had to pay the bills with portraits. Every nobleman or noblewoman needed a formal portrait and, as they got older, perhaps another."

"I have to admit, I didn't look very closely at the portraits in the galleries."

"Yes, it's easy to think of them as just photographs, isn't it? You walk into a Renaissance gallery and you're overwhelmed with a sea of portraits all staring at you. From a distance, they look interchangeable.

The problem is, they weren't meant to be displayed that way. They were meant to be displayed as a single focal point in a room. Generally, a nobleman would hang his portrait in a beautifully designed parlor or waiting area. Without modern communication systems, people would just show up at your house and have to wait until they could be seen. While waiting to meet the nobleman, a visitor would have the formal portrait to view. The portraits were designed to highlight how the owner wished to be perceived. The artist would work hard to create a sense of the owner, his strength or inner beauty or whatever was desired."

Thinking of Howie, I remember one painting from an exhibit in Rome. "It was fun to see how they incorporated pets and personal items into the paintings. I saw one painting with a woman who had two Italian greyhounds in her portrait."

"You probably saw Pompeo Batoni's *Diana*. It's on loan to the Colonna in Rome. It *is* a lovely portrait. The noblewoman in the portrait was depicted as the goddess Diana to emphasize her power and beauty. She wanted people to view her that way. Do you have a special interest in the little hounds?"

I explain a bit about Howie and our trip to scatter his ashes.

"I'm sorry you've lost your friend. We really do make our pets into family members, don't we?" She pauses for a moment and continues, "But the Italian greyhound came to Italy only recently. The origins of the breed date to early Egypt, I'm sure. Many hieroglyphs depict the little dogs, and in some of the ancient tombs, they found collars and skeletons. Around the First Dynasty, the Egyptians even worshipped a god with the head of a greyhound: Anubis. He was the god that greeted you in the afterlife. He was the keeper of a special set of scales. He would weigh your heart to see if you were worthy of eternal life."

"How do you know so much about Egypt?"

"I was an art teacher before I retired. But if you want a sweet remembrance of your dog, stick to Italy. You should be able to go to almost any Renaissance exhibit. The Italian greyhound was one of the most painted and most loved dogs of the period. There are hundreds of portraits that include the little hounds in them. Although originally from Egypt, the greyhounds have been loved in Italy for centuries."

"It's funny you say that. We saw a mosaic of a dog that looked just like Howie in the ruins in Pompeii." I tell Darlene of our trip, although not of the dream or finding the medallion shard.

"You see? Your little friend isn't really gone. He's still with you." With one hand, Darlene touches her heart.

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"That's gin," says Brian, playing his last card.

I shake my head. "No more for me. You keep winning."

"I am pretty good at cards."

I'm about to say, "Winning isn't everything," but realize I'm tired and perhaps a little cranky. The plane from Heathrow to Boston is crowded. It's a night flight, and most people are asleep. We've been playing a difficult game of gin rummy. Difficult because our tray tables didn't create much of a place to play. Difficult because I didn't know how to play this dumb game. Most difficult because I'm feeling trapped, jet-lagged, and wanting to be home.

"I think I'm in a sour mood. Sorry."

"Sour because the trip's over?"

"The trip was great, but I'm looking forward to being at home. Or at least being out of planes and airports."

"You and me both."

Brian puts the cards away and props himself against the window to sleep.

I decide to read for a bit, but I'm too tired to concentrate. I reach down to put the book into my backpack, and one finger touches the medallion fragment from Pompeii. The segment of bronze that Howie led me to. It feels like a mild electric charge is running through it. Maybe static built up from the dry air of the plane? It's not unpleasant, but it's there.

I pull it out, and in the dim interior of the plane, I would swear it's softly illuminated. Where the edges are broken, there's a faint blue light. When I turn on my reading light, the glow disappears, but in the darkness of the plane, it has a slight aura.

The front of the medallion is smooth, and its circular design is enhanced with concentric ridges. The back of the medallion is also smooth but inscribed with writing or symbols.

It feels good in my hand. I know that sounds odd. Why would a shard of metal from ancient Italy feel good? I return it to my backpack, then think better of it and put it in the pocket of my jeans. It's safer there.

Chapter Two

Back to the Renaissance

Ally Wilmarth and I have stopped outside of Boston to recharge the LEAF. We're making the ninety-minute trip from Arkham into the city for the day. It's a chilly spring morning with an overcast sky and a light breeze.

Although I've known her for less than a year, Ally has become a good friend. I met her at Miskatonic University, where she's working on her master's degree in literature and folklore. She is one of those people who is fiercely loyal but who will also call you on your stuff. She tends to speak what's on her mind. Generally, that's good.

She's wearing dark brown corduroy pants and a beige sweater. A scarf is looped around her long neck—she knows my LEAF doesn't do the best job of keeping passengers warm. Her light brown hair is pulled back, and she's wearing a felted hat.

"I never really thought of you as an art lover," says Ally. "At least not an art *museum* lover. I'm surprised you wanted to go to the Museum of Fine Arts."

"That's true," I say, nodding. "I don't normally have art museums on my priority list. When we were in Italy, though, we went to quite a few. Brian told me a bit about the Renaissance style of painting and sculpture. Some of the pieces we saw in Rome were amazing."

"You must mean the religious pieces. Like at the Sistine Chapel? *The Last Supper*? *The Lamentation of Christ*?"

She's naming off some of the pieces that we did see in Italy. They were spectacular.

"But when I think of the Renaissance," she continues, "what I mostly think of are the endless portraits. I can't imagine you wanting to see an exhibit of portraits."

She's right, but there's one portrait that I do want to see. It's called *Portrait of Veronica Conti*. Brian is on a mailing list from the Museum of Fine Arts, and they're hosting a traveling exhibit called Masters of the Italian Renaissance. They sent him a flyer for the exhibit.

As I unplug the LEAF from the charger, I reach inside my jacket pocket. "Take a look," I say, handing Ally the flyer.

She whistles and says, "Holy cow. It's Howie."

Well, it has Veronica Conti, too, but the portrait features her Italian greyhound, and it looks just like Howie. Same color, same size. The dog seems to be smiling.

"You still really miss him, don't you?" asks Ally as we get back into the car.

"Not as much as I did, but when this picture popped into Brian's stack of junk mail, it seemed like I should come to the museum to say goodbye. It feels like he sent me a postcard from Italy and that I should come to Boston and read it."

"You are a silly man. Wonderful, but silly at the same time. I'm sure we'll have fun in the city today, even if we get bored at the MFA. Remember, you promised we'd go by Emerson College so I could see the Majestic Theatre. It's haunted, and I want to check it out. Plenty of students have reported ghosts. Oh, and let's have some cocktails afterwards."

It's Friday, midmorning, and the Museum of Fine Arts isn't crowded. I don't teach on Fridays this term, and Ally only had one early-morning class. We've made it to Boston in good time, and the LEAF is charging in an EV spot close to the museum. As we walk up the steps, there are banners proclaiming Masters of the Italian Renaissance. It must be one of their showpiece exhibits for the spring.

We get our tickets and start to explore. Visiting art museums, even with a friend, is a solitary pastime. You might point at a painting and whisper a few words about it, but otherwise you're by yourself.

The large gallery at MFA is filled with some nice paintings. I'm glad it's not all portraits, as Ally suggested it might be. Instead there are a

variety of subjects from the period. Portraits, yes, but also impressive landscapes and devotional works of art. We find out that the exhibit is part of a famous collection and was specifically designed to tour the United States. Many of the great masters are included.

Ally points out Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo* on loan from the Uffizi in Florence. It was painted in the early 1500s and depicts Mary, Jesus, and Joseph in a family scene. Ally whispers, "What's going on with the nudes?"

I hadn't noticed them, but it does seem weird. In the background of the picture, behind Jesus, are five nude figures. They seem to be staring off into space. I shrug. If there's a hidden meaning here, I'm not getting it.

The smaller galleries of the exhibit are more interesting to me. Each focuses on one artist or one theme and are better at capturing my attention. One of the small galleries features several paintings by Sandro Botticelli. In Italy, we saw his most famous works, *The Birth of Venus* and *La Primavera*, but this traveling exhibit has some of his smaller pieces. Botticelli was known for his bright, clear colors, and the exhibit talks about how he was able to achieve these effects using the limited paint pigments of the day. Modern restoration of his paintings is difficult because of the variety of substances he used to create the bright colors. Ally and I talk about the trade-offs that an art restoration project must make to keep the original alive for modern viewers.

We're coming to the end of the tour, and I haven't seen Howie yet. I'm a little disappointed. The exhibit has been lovely, and generally interesting, but I had a particular motive in coming. We walk past the short hallway to the restrooms and approach the doorway to the last gallery. That's when I see the portrait.

It's larger than life. It fills the whole end wall of the final small gallery. In fact, it's so large, there are only two items in the room: the painting and a display case. The subject of the portrait is quite imposing. I try to imagine what it would have been like to show up at Veronica Conti's estate and be left in a parlor to wait. With this portrait looming over the fireplace, I might have lost my nerve and gone home. She's staring straight out at her visitors.

"Not the friendliest looking, is she?" Ally says. "And it doesn't really look like she should be in her bedroom, either."

Ally's right. I hadn't noticed. The background objects of the picture look like they should be from her dressing room or bedroom. A table with toiletries. A low couch. The hint of a bed on the far left. But Veronica's not dressed for the bedroom. She's in a deep green dress

with a low neckline. Garnet earrings and an oversized garnet brooch don't add any femininity to the portrait. It looks like she's ready to take care of business.

Then I see Howie. At the bottom of the portrait, on the right, is her Italian greyhound. He's looking down and across the bottom of the portrait. Stylistically, it gives movement to the painting. I see how it works. First, you follow the curve of the draperies to her dressing table. Then the angle of the dressing table points to the dog. Then the gaze of the dog takes you across the bottom and out of the painting again. It's like a spiral of activity around the central gaze of Veronica Conti. Perhaps she liked to see herself at the center of a busy life.

The traveling exhibition adds to this conceit by giving Howie (the dog in the portrait, I mean) something to actually look at. He's looking down at a display case to the left of the painting. Ally and I approach the case, and Ally gives a little gasp. "Oh my. They're the things from the painting. Can you imagine how rare they must be?"

I see what she means. In the painting, Veronica Conti's dressing table is depicted with small personal objects. The case displays the actual items. It's astounding to think that the painting and the objects could have been preserved together for over five hundred years.

The case contains a hand mirror, some combs, a bottle—likely for perfume—and a vase, which holds flowers in the portrait. It also contains what is described as a talisman, sitting on a small stand. Even in the painting, the talisman is broken; it's missing a section. The display tag says it's most likely from the ruins at Pompeii. When I read the word *Pompeii*, a little thrill prickles at the back of my neck. For some reason, I look over my shoulder and see Howie looking down at me from the portrait. At this angle, he's looking right into my eyes, smiling.

It's a wonderful display, and Ally and I spend about fifteen minutes looking at it from every angle.

Ally and I leave the exhibit and head for the museum shop. She's hoping to get a book about the Renaissance, and I'm hoping they have a catalog or a postcard that features the portrait of Veronica Conti and her dog. We browse for a bit, and she picks out a few things to buy. As Ally gets in line to pay, I say to her, "Could you check out for us? I'll catch up with you in a minute. I need to use the restroom."

I hand Ally the two postcards that I want to purchase and turn back to the hall where the restrooms are. Over my shoulder, I say, "Lunch after this, right? I'll pay you back then."

"No worries," she says. "But don't be long; I'm hungry. I'll wait for

you on the steps."

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We've stopped to eat at a Mexican grill near the Museum of Fine Arts. It's warmed up at midday, and the sky is clearing. Patches of blue show through the clouds.

Over tacos and a shared quesadilla, Ally has been telling me about progress she's making on her master's thesis.

"Then I'll tie in the story about the deadly viper and the mermaid," she says. She's looking at me intently, as though daring me to comment.

"I'm sorry, Ally. I haven't been listening, have I?"

"It would appear not," she says. "What's up? What *are* you thinking about?"

"I was wondering. Do you know anything about ancient medallions?"

"Well, that's an unexpected question." Ally smiles, intrigued by the change in topic. "I guess I do know something about them. They figure into many myths and folktales. Do you know what period? Do you know what the medallion was created for?"

I shrug.

"I need a little more to go on."

I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out something that's traveled back with me from Italy, back from early Pompeii: the fragment of the medallion I found.

"I see," says Ally. "Yes, it does look old, although it's not worn at the edges. Where did you find it?"

I explain the day Brian and I spent in Pompeii and how the dream of Howie led me to find the piece of medallion.

"So about two thousand years, then, if it was entombed with the rest of Pompeii. If this fragment is part of a larger, round piece, I would say it's not a medallion. Medallions were generally used as jewelry in ancient times. This would be a bit big and heavy for wearing, except ceremoniously. Don't you think it would be over three inches in diameter?" Ally picks up the piece and examines its broken edges. "It does look like bronze, and that material existed in the period of Pompeii and before. The broken edges look recent, though. They almost look fresh." She thinks another minute. "I would call it a talisman or an amulet, although it's perhaps too big for an amulet. Often people wore amulets."

"So what's the difference between a medallion, an amulet, and a talisman? Other than size, I mean."

"A medallion is a prize or an award. Think of it as something given when you win a race or complete a major achievement. An Olympic medal would be a good example of a medallion, and both words share the same root. Amulets and talismans, on the other hand, are magical in nature."

Ally's an expert on folklore, so I'm not surprised she knows about these ancient items. "An amulet was generally created to ward off evil spirits, bad fortune, danger, or disease. You would have a shaman, a witch, or perhaps an alchemist create it for you."

"And a talisman?"

"They're supposed to bring you magical powers and good luck. Generally, a talisman is created by the person intending to use it. You would forge or carve your object, then energize it with symbols and prayers, or possibly incantations. A talisman is generally carried on your person, although a small one might be worn. You've probably heard of the great Seal of Solomon? That's a talisman or possibly a ring referred to in the Old Testament that supposedly gave King Solomon great magical powers. This one does have symbols on it," she remarks, turning the fragment over in her hand. "Or at least I can see the edges of some markings or writing. Would you like me to take a picture of it? I could have someone in Archeology take a look and see if they can identify it for you."

"That would be great."

Ally snaps a couple of pictures with her phone. "A more contemporary example of talismans would be the *anting-anting* of the Philippines."

Ally's turned into a pure mythology professor now. She's going to make a great one, too. Nobody can remember all this arcane stuff like she can.

"The *anting-anting* talismans precede Spanish colonization of the Philippines but became famous during that time. Using specific prayers that are called *oraciones*, they would imbue their talismans with a variety of occult powers. The talisman charged with a *pamako* prayer would allow you to paralyze your attacker. The *tagabulag* prayer would make you invisible. The *tagaliwas* would make you spear-proof or bulletproof. The *anting-anting* are true talismans from the standpoint that the wearer must charge and recharge them. In spring, during the full moon of the Ostara cycle, you would imbue your talisman with the desired *oraciones*. Some adherents even ink or tattoo

the *oraciones* onto their skin to bind the talisman, symbolically, to their body."

Ally stops for a breath and then plunges in for the big finish. "Today in the Philippines, *antings* are sold in the markets in the way we might sell alternative medicine remedies here in America. They have *anting-anting* talismans to cure a variety of ailments and to protect you against accidental harm. There are even charms that will make you irresistible to women or bring you great good fortune."

I'm nodding. "Great good fortune."



The return trip from Boston is uneventful. Ally and I take turns driving, and the weather continues to stay mostly clear. It's nearly dusk when we reach Arkham, and Brian has texted to see if Ally and I would like to have dinner. Neither of us generally pass up one of Brian's home-cooked meals.

Arkham is mostly deserted in the early evening. The *Welcome to Arkham* sign also reads, *Where History Meets Industry*. I always smile when I see this, as the town of 12,530 residents is clearly not amid an industrial resurgence. The downtown business district is only five blocks wide and ten blocks long. It's after closing time for most of the businesses. Driving down Main Street, we pass the city's one large grocery store and a variety of small shops, including a dress shop, a gift store, a beauty parlor, a florist, a stationery store, and a Radio Shack. The architecture is mixed but leaning toward the antique. The gift store, for instance, appears to be housed in a centuries-old but remodeled stable. A few of the storefronts are empty, giving the accurate appearance of a town on the decline.

At the end of Main Street, we pass Three Rivers Hardware and Lumber. Brian has worked there almost nine years and oversees their lumberyard. He started at Three Rivers after moving to Arkham in his early twenties.

Brian's small house is outside of town, along River Road. He describes his house as a fixed-up fishing shack, but I would say *craftsman mini-bungalow*. He's had it for two years and is remodeling it bit by bit. It has a porch across the front and a simple green metal roof. The siding is of stained cedar shakes and glows a soft amber color. Most everything on the outside is new or refinished. The inside is a different story. He's updating one room at a time.

Brian's on the porch when we pull up. Tonight, he's wearing a ball

cap and a rust-colored plaid shirt tucked into his jeans. His hair is getting long. It's sticking out of his ball cap around his ears and gives his handsome face a more casual look. He greets us warmly.

"How are my favorite travelers?"

Ally gives him a hug. "We had a fun trip to the museum, had a nice luncheon, and even did a bit of sightseeing. Did you know that the Majestic Theatre is haunted?"

Brian laughs before he gives me a kiss. "That's our Ally. She goes to Boston for culture and comes back with a ghost story. Did you see the ghost?"

"Not me. The theater has quite a history, though. It was built in 1903, and when it was remodeled in the 1980s, many of the tradespeople reported seeing a variety of ghosts."

"Were the sightings credible?" asks Brian.

"One was particularly interesting." Ally's enjoying telling of our short visit to the Cutler Majestic Theatre on the Emerson College campus, one of her requested stops in the city. "The former mayor of Boston died while attending a performance there. One of the workers who saw this ghost recognized his picture and was able to identify him."

Brian and Ally love to have discussions about the paranormal. She's a folklorist, and he loves to read urban fantasy fiction. As the science buff, sometimes I feel left out. I leave the two of them happily discussing the Majestic Theatre and its several ghosts while I go into the bedroom that Brian and I share when I sleep over. We're engaged, but we still have our separate places.

I reach into my left coat pocket and pull out the talisman fragment from Pompeii. It gleams around the edges in the soft lighting of the bedroom. I turn it over and look at the markings that Ally pointed out when we were in the restaurant in Boston.

I reach into my right coat pocket and pull out the larger talisman fragment that I stole from the Masters of the Italian Renaissance. I can't really believe it. Did I *really* steal this object from a museum? Why didn't alarm bells go off? Why didn't security stop me as I tried to exit? Why didn't Ally wonder why I was so long in the bathroom? Why, oh why, did I take it?

The answer to that last question comes to me easily, though. I just wish it were a more legitimate reason: *Howie wanted me to take it*. I could almost hear him speaking to me from the portrait of Veronica Conti: *Here's the rest of it. Here's the part you're missing.*

And Howie is right. Although separated by four thousand miles,

these are definitely two pieces of the same object. The broken edges match perfectly. I easily fit them together. There's almost a feeling of magnetic pull to them, and once together, it's hard to pull them apart again.

The front of the talisman is round with smooth ridges. There's a hole, offset and near the edge, that might have been used as an anchor point for a binding of some sort or for a cord. The back of the piece is full of symbols or pictographic writing. I'm anxious to see what Ally can find out about it.

I'm also completely ashamed at having stolen the artifact from the museum display case. Once again, I think, *Could I have really done this?*

Curiosity and guilt are powerful inducements, and I decide to confess. Maybe my friends will help me figure out what must be done. Will the museum like having a "whole" talisman, rather than just the fragment? Could we send the talisman back parcel post and avoid questions?

I enter Brian's living room with the put-back-together talisman outstretched in one hand.

Ally immediately realizes what I've done. A look of shock comes over her face, then an odd sort of smile. "Dr. Mac Mackenzie. You thief! You grave robber! You Indiana Jones wannabe!"

Brian hasn't seen the talisman either whole or in pieces, so he's looking quizzically, first at Ally, then at me.

"Your fiancé stole that from the Museum of Fine Arts today. He said he was going to the bathroom and must have snuck back into the gallery and stole that talisman."

Brian is stunned and silent. Now accused, shame shades my face a bright red. Even my arms are flushing, and suddenly the talisman seems hot in my hand. I put it down on the dining table.

"You're so funny, Mac," says Ally. She's laughing at my red face and hangdog look. "We'll just take it back. Maybe we'll find out where the exhibit is headed next and send the talisman there. That would confuse things."

Ally's talking calmly, but Brian is still staring, still silent. It occurs to me that he doesn't think it's possible that his partner would do such a thing. Not Mac. Not the trustworthy and solid-citizen Mac. I guess he's right. *It felt more like a stranger did this. Not me.*

Ally takes more pictures of the talisman now that the symbols and inscriptions can be seen in their entirety. She still wants to see if someone in Archeology can tell us more about it.

Brian has prepared a wonderful dinner for us. He and Ally have baked salmon while I have one of my favorites: grilled cheese sandwiches. I know it doesn't sound like much, but when you've had one that Brian makes with gruyère cheese, smoky peppers, and avocado slices, you may think differently. We all have a fresh green salad and some roasted potato wedges.

"You are going to take the talisman back, right?" Brian is making a statement, not really asking a question. "You should send it in pieces so that the museum can see that their original piece is unchanged. Then you can label the new piece and where you found it."

"That makes sense," says Ally. "That way the museum can decide whether the talisman should be shown as a whole or if it should still match the portrait of Veronica Conti. They may even send the second fragment back to Pompeii."

"I think you should send it back anonymously. Returning it doesn't mean you won't get in trouble for taking it in the first place," says Brian.

Brian and Ally are right, of course. I'll get the pieces packaged and sent tomorrow. Maybe the museum will get them before they notice the theft. What was I thinking? *What was Howie thinking?*

After dinner and kitchen cleanup, we're sitting around Brian's woodstove, enjoying its warmth. The outside temperature has dropped quite a bit, and the light and warmth from the fire provide a backdrop for good conversation. We've left the talisman sitting on the dining table in Brian's kitchen.

"What do you think of tiling the back wall?" asks Brian, pointing. He's talking about the wall behind his woodstove. It's his current improvement project..

"Do you like the slate better? Or the tile?"

He has samples stacked against the Sheetrock behind the stove.

"The slate is amazing. Would you do the whole wall?" I ask.

"That's a good question. The slate is expensive. Even with my discount, covering the whole wall would cost a lot."

As we're talking, a funny noise comes from around the corner of the living area: a sizzling. It sounds like Brian left something cooking on the stove. The sound is so slight you barely hear it. Then it fades again, into nothingness.

Then we hear a *pop*!

"Did you leave something on the stove?" asks Ally.

We all get up and turn our attention to the kitchen alcove in Brian's small house. The stove is empty, but a slight smoky cloud is hanging

over the dining table.

Then—a dazzling blue flash.

We're momentarily stunned. I blink several times, grateful that I can start making out things around me again.

"What the heck," says Brian. He's looking at the dining table in the middle of his kitchen. A cloud of black smoke is rising from it. The smoke's coming from a blackened, charred area in the center. It's the talisman! It's glowing. It's burned through a table runner and part of Brian's wooden table.

As we approach, I notice two things. First, the talisman's hot, like it's been newly forged. The side with the symbols and writing is on top, and the etching is clear and perfect. Second, it's mended itself completely. There is no hint of separate pieces, no faint lines or cracks. It's as if it's been newly cast.

Brian and I are too stunned to speak.

Ally whistles. "I guess we're not sending it back to the museum, after all."

Continue the Story...

The short story you just read, "The Talisman," is the prequel to the novel *Haunted Hills*. It's also part of the larger story of "Mac" Mackenzie and the series of books and stories set in H. P. Lovecraft's Arkham, Massachusetts and Miskatonic University.

If you enjoyed this sample, make sure you check out Lawrence King's other titles available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

You can also keep up-to-date by following the author's blog and website at: http://www.miskatonic.us.

Acknowledgments

I must acknowledge the Portland Center for Spiritual Living and its writers group led by Kathy Marshack. I would not have managed to continue this series without its support and encouragement. If you want to write a book, join a writers group!

I also need to honor H. P. Lovecraft for providing the wonderful and terrible locations of Arkham, Kingsport, and Miskatonic University hidden away in a fictitious version of Essex Country, Massachusetts. A few of his characters (or their ancestors) also appear in the book. If you're a Lovecraft fan, I hope you'll enjoy their presence.

My protagonist, "Mac" Mackenzie loves science and so do I. Because of this, I have chosen to provide scientific explanations for many of the happenings in *Haunted Hills.* Having said this, I don't claim to be a scientist myself. Where I've gotten the science bits wrong (or arrived at the wrong conclusions regarding them), please forgive me. At the end of the day, this is just a novel.

About the Author

Lawrence King is a Pacific Northwest minister, author, and inspirational speaker. You can find him on Sundays at the Center for Spiritual Living in Portland, Oregon, where he is the senior minister and primary speaker.

You can follow his inspirational Sunday podcasts on iTunes and Google Play. Look for "Portland Center for Spiritual Living" podcast.

As an author, he's taking the themes of H. P. Lovecraft to the next level in his "Miskatonic University" series of books an stories. If you enjoyed this novel, make sure you check out Lawrence King's other works available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble. You can also keep up-to-date by following the author's blog and website at: http://www.miskatonic.us.

When asked about the relationship between his writings and his role as minister he explains:

As a New Thought minister, I affirm the positive nature of God and the inherent friendliness of the universe. Heaven and hell only exist as we humans imagine them. As an author of urban fantasy, I reaffirm this same notion. Evil only exists as a reflection of our beliefs and the choices we make. When we think positively and make better choices, we experience a better life.

Lawrence King is a fourth-generation Oregonian. As a kid, he watched science fiction movies every Saturday morning and was chased out of the adult-horror section of the library weekly. He always has a stack of inspirational books (including science fiction and horror) on his bedside table along with his gratitude journal. He, his

partner, and two dogs live in Portland, Oregon, when they're not at the beach.